

## **Army's First Lean Six Sigma Master Black Belts Revel in Moment, Share Experiences and Success**

*Newly Minted Master Black Belts Aim to 'Foster Cultural Revolution of Innovative Change' Impacting the Warrior*

The 2007 pioneer class of Master Black Belts, the highest internationally recognized level of Lean Six Sigma (LSS) expertise, will be remembered for the precedent(s) they set during this first official round of MBB training completed on 3 August. Many candidates have prior service in the Army and fellow armed services and temporarily departed to pursue other career opportunities, while some never left the government. Most have advanced academic degrees, while all have significant professional work experience. They are an impressive group with many interesting backgrounds. Of the 15 candidates in the class were graduates from the Wharton School of Business along with Chicago's Northwestern; a former University of Tennessee football player; two West Pointers; two with specific business/corporate experience with Geico and Delta Airlines respectively, in addition to a former realtor and horticulture enthusiast. Additionally, projects to which all 15 candidates have been dedicated to during the past months, one can see the array of experiences, not to mention the variety of perspectives these candidates bring to the table.

Prior to their graduation on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of August, their coursework, their expectations, why they were selected as candidates, and what challenges they expect to face upon returning to their commands where they will face additional tests were discussed. One could gather that each candidate, had a story to tell, an experience to share, and more importantly, something (read *many*) they can all teach. The candidates possess a knowledge and expertise they can impart to those in their command, to their individual mentees down the road, and most importantly, to the Army as a whole.

## **The FIRST LSS Master Black Belt Class**



***The MBB Graduates.** Front row, from l to r: CPT George Harris, Phillip Provencher, LTC Ann Larsen, Deanne Snodgrass, LTC Garrett Heath; Back row, from l to r: 1LT Terrance Wilson, Charles Brandon, Anthony Merritt, Michelle Graham, LTC Larry Meyer, Hung Nguyen, Donald Pennington, Mary Nelson, James, Wasiloff, and Matthew Zieniewicz*

The MBB candidates were asked why so much weight has been placed on the creation of an Army MBB and what all this change means. Mr. Don Pennington, currently with the U.S. Army Forces Command (FORSCOM), an Air Force veteran and formerly with Delta Airlines, has been especially active in effecting key changes within FORSCOM. He referred to seven projects already completed at FORSCOM, results ranging from reduced cycle times, to the elimination of superfluous steps in the production of equipment, to projects that have saved the Army millions of dollars, to the flexibility many of the projects have now attained. His work with the G4 (Logistics) focused on the 10-20 Equipment Reset Processes associated with Operation Iraqi Freedom/Operation Enduring Freedom redeployment. Thanks to LSS techniques, a cross-functional team studied material ordering, material tracking, material receipting,

management, and the budgetary processes – all a series of processes that were necessary for FORSCOM to address. Mr. Pennington was in fact hired to energize FORSCOM's LSS program. His successful management efforts have launched newfound focus on earning a Master Black Belt certification. Mr. Pennington sees his role as a potential MBB as an important one. He firmly believes the Master Black Belt is not merely an investment, but a force that will "make things better" by "effecting change from within for the Soldier."

Michelle Graham, of TRADOC's Army Accessions Command (USAAC) has been actively working toward the execution of Just-Do-Its, Rapid Improvement Events, and Value Stream Analysis (VSA) projects. She has made a long term commitment to supporting and developing lean operations for the USAAC. She also has assisted in the development of a multi-functional recruiter (one that recruits for all jobs) in order to do better business between USAREC, ROTC, and the Cadet Command (in attempting to find a common ground between officer and enlisted recruiting). Ms. Graham argues this new Master Black Belt status will "not just be an extra duty" but something "we believe in and want others people to believe in...." She firmly argues that it "all boils down to the individual Soldier" and that it is long overdue that "we make the system better for the Soldier." As a MBB-to-be Ms. Graham plans to ensure Soldiers remains the focal point in the Army's move forward.

When pressed about certain successes they have witnessed within their commands brought on by LSS, the MBB candidates all had a positive story to tell: Lieutenant Colonel Larry Meyer, serves as a Deployment Advisor for the Office of the Chief Army Reserve (OCAR), and has been one of the key stewards in changing how Army reserve units are mobilized. OCAR has altered the manner in which it fills openings, conducts training, and improves scheduling. Today, the command runs itself as a business would, primarily due to the impact of LSS and Soldiers like Meyer. As a result, they are proud to be "shaking the status quo" while helping the Army "reinvent itself" as it "taps into the inherent imagination and thoughtfulness of the Soldier."

Others, such as Tony Merritt a USAREUR Assistant Program Officer in Germany, have worked on various completed million-dollar projects considered key breakthroughs in how the Army implements LSS throughout its ranks. Merritt's work

within the G-6 has led to the turnover of technology and “new opportunities for Continuous Process Improvement.” Merritt acknowledges that Lean technologies are “replacing old forces” and that ultimately, the successes speak for themselves. In addition to improving the flow and production of equipment and saving time and money, USAREUR has “transformed the forces, the focus areas, and the transfer of knowledge while shortening the learning curves for certain goals... this has helped maintain the quality of life” for the troops and their supporting families in Europe.

Lieutenant Colonel Garrett Heath, a new action officer within the Office of the DUSA (BT) echoed what every MBB candidate intends to engage over time. Heath’s focus will allow his work to impact the Office of the DUSA (BT) internally. Heath’s new job, while he completes his future projects will be ensuring that the DUSA (BT) itself sets a worthy example by “drinking the same ‘Kool Aid’ as everyone else.”

As to the challenges the Army is facing while implementing LSS, this initial group of MBB candidates agreed the biggest hurdle is cynicism and the ever-present inertia still found across the Army’s ranks. Because of this enervating spirit, LTC Meyer confirms that the Army must continually “reinvent itself,” that it must “tap in to the inherent imagination and thoughtfulness of the Soldier.” Deanne Snodgrass of ASA(LT) at Fort Monmouth maintains that the manner of out-of-the-box thinking often presents a challenge, and that “motivating the workforce must start at the top” of every command. Michelle Graham believes the typical change in command in every unit often breaks up the momentum being carried by what LSS and its proponents have implemented. She argues that LSS should become part of the Army’s core values and that with time, no matter the change of command, “no one will have to be sold on the system because LSS will have been engrained in the Soldier like a battle drill, as if it were second nature.” Graham refers to this as catching “LSS disease,” an epidemic of sorts, but clearly one the Army intends to spread and not rid itself of. Phillip Provencher of the Army Special Operations Command summed up his MBB classmates’ challenge: “MBBs not only must spearhead certain projects and teach new waves of Green, Black, and Master Black Belts, but they must help ‘foster a cultural revolution of innovative change,’” one the Army will hopefully recognize as having been planted within the spirit of this first Master Black Belt class.

**Commands represented in the *FIRST* Master Black Belt course, 2007**

**USASOC** – U.S. Army Special Operations Command

**TRADOC** – U.S. Army Training & Doctrine Command

**USAREUR** – U.S. Army Europe

**OCAR** – Office of the Chief of Army Reserve

**DUSA (BT)** – Deputy Undersecretary of Army (Business Transformation)

**FORSCOM** – U.S. Army Forces Command

**AMC** -- US Army Materiel Command

**ASA (ALT)** -- Assistant Secretary of the Army, Acquisitions, Logistics, & Technology

## **The MBB Candidates Speak**

An excerpt of an interview with six of the MBB summer 2007 candidates. The interview session took place on 30 July 2007 just after their *fifth* day of Master Black Belt training at Fort Belvoir.

**BTKC:** *What does this Master Black Belt achievement mean? What is its real significance for everyone involved?*

**LTC Larry Meyer (OCAR):** What LSS will do for the Army is provide better stewardship of the taxpayers' dollar.... Hopefully we as leaders, will teach others to do more with less...that way we help set an example wherever we go. LSS sustains change

over time...this is definitely not a short-term philosophy, but something we hope will be around a long time.

**LTC Garrett Heath (DUSA (BT)):** This MBB course is a huge investment for the Army. We intend to use people with BB-LSS experience, especially those within the Army (as we train more and more Soldiers). This whole effort speaks volumes of the Army's commitment to move forward with CPI and LSS changes.

**Tony Merritt (USAREUR):** Army transformation is setting the footprint worldwide; it is an Army of new instruction with old processes and old business paradigms. Are we actually improving or are we changing for the sake of change? I believe the Army's commitment to the MBB program answers that question. Master Black Belt status will now give us the tools to help facilitate these new techniques and how to sustain them.

**Michelle Graham (TRADOC - Army Accessions Command):** LSS is a great tool to use... it should never just be considered 'an extra duty'.... I believe in this and I want other people to believe in it.... The bottom line is the Soldier...how can we make the system better for the Soldier?... Today, [because] we're operating in a war-time environment, with less people, a smaller budget...we need to look at the system so that the Soldier gets what he needs. The MBB will hopefully help make that happen.

**Don Pennington – (FORSCOM):** It's not only an investment, but it's also acknowledging that we must go forward to effect real change...we're making things better for each Soldier while reducing costs and helping sustain the Army long-term.

\* \* \*

**BTKC:** *What kinds of accomplishments in the areas of continuous improvement are you already seeing in your organization, as a result of implementing LSS techniques?*

**LTC Meyer:** We're shaking the status quo and moving toward a more business-like approach.... Our early focus has been mobilization of units, there has been real good progress there.... We have also made an effort to put in place a system to fill openings pretty quickly, in addition to some work on Soldiers' training requirements...The word has been passed to units to improve (by using LSS techniques) across the board. We have seen successes in scheduling especially... [the entire process is now much] more efficient.

**LTC Heath:** We're actually beginning to use what we are learning in this course within the office of the DUSA (BT) itself.... The message might be that we are setting the example, that we're drinking the same 'Kool Aid' as everyone else... This has become an opportunity for talented people within the command to fight for an opportunity... There are lots of people here who *want* to make a change.

**Mr. Merritt:** We've seen improvements in the G-staff section, the G-6, as technology turns over, there are lots of opportunities for CPI to be put in place. Lean technologies

are replacing old... we're continuously asking 'how do I get there?' ... 'How do I integrate?' .... At USAREUR we also ask how to transfer knowledge and shorten learning curves for certain goals, how to maintain quality of life...

**Deanne Snodgrass – ASA (LT):** At Fort Monmouth million dollar projects are already underway and completed... Most people actually have begun doing things differently. Even though there may sometimes not be an official project underway, people are beginning to think differently, and to act differently.

**Ms. Graham:** We have helped reduce cycle times of processes, starting with the recruiter in how he gets his leads...now [there are] less duplication of leads, better quality of leads...of processing time... qualifying an applicant's write-up, reducing time, etc.... The new adjustments [have] worked... for example, the scholarship process takes less time... Another big change in the Accessions Command that we've noticed is that all the agencies working together such as G-1, Medcomm, Netcomm, the training bases, etc. – they work because our processes cross all those domains. It's a matter of getting people, the subject matter experts especially to work together, to aim to reduce redundancies... VSA is actually getting everyone in the room to see the eye-opening process... It is true that once people see the tool work they want to use it more and more.

**Mr. Pennington:** Seven projects thus far have been completed at FORSCOM... ranging from across the spectrum within LSS. We have reduced cycle times by 75%, and eliminated cycle times also by high percentages... We have placed value-added steps, eliminated duplicated steps... and projects have saved from millions to a few dollars.... As a result, we have more options...[there are] little pluses everywhere you look, it's not all about how much we saved or how much time was saved, it's also about the flexibility we've now been given, how much we've given our customers.... We have now reached a flexibility that will help us improve in the long term...

\* \* \*

**BTKC:** *What challenges are we facing in creating an irrevocable culture of continuous improvement?*

**LTC Meyer:** The Army has had to reinvent itself.... We need to be tapped in to the inherent imagination and thoughtfulness of the Soldier, it's *not* just a down-driven exercise.... In my unit, at the Soldier's level there is a certain receptiveness, they sense the Army is doing something different... on the Reserve side, there are limitations on what can be accomplished, time is an issue, as part-time soldiers there are limitations on them and what they can do, one definitely has to be practical because there are still many changes to address in the future.

**Mr. Merritt:** Resistance to change, inertia.... We need to lead that change, that transformation toward better stewardship, via financial means, personnel etc. As Master Black Belts, we need to be the change agents ourselves...

**Ms. Snodgrass:** The challenge lies in motivating the workforce, and one must start at the very top.... To change the thinking this has been and will continue to be difficult....

**Ms. Graham --** Making LSS part of our core values is a challenge.... The change in command affects this constantly, every time [one] has a new commander/director it seems like one is starting from ground zero all over again thus, we become constant sellers of this tool.... It [must] become engrained as a core value, no matter who comes in, if we're 'there', no matter who it is, [the new command] won't ever have to be sold on the system.... We can [continue to] move forward.... All of this needs to be engrained in the soldier like a battle drill, as if it were second nature.

**Mr. Pennington --** Developing the right metrics is the biggest challenge -- that will drive the right behavior in the future at least from the top down -- that, to me, is the biggest challenge.... How am I myself being measured is a big question.... How is my commander being measured and how does that create a behavior that asks 'how am I going to change?'... This will be challenging, we don't even have the proper data discipline to collect the right info that we can measure... therefore, we need to take the big picture and boil it down and ask *where* we start...

\* \* \*

**BTKC:** *Has the coursework/curriculum lived up to expectations? What are some appropriate descriptions regarding what the course material, the classroom experience has been like?*

**MBB candidates:** Challenging...in depth... rigorous...robust...eye-opening... The brain power here is pretty impressive.... I came in wondering who my classmates would be... Wow! What a great group of people; great candidates!.... One of the benefits of this program is that this level of talent has always been here, this tool has found the right people and given them an avenue to add their full value. Now they're coming out of the woodwork saying 'I want to help!'

The instructors were instrumental in our success, they felt the students out, they always played devil's advocate...looking for individual weaknesses, by testing them... by drilling...by pointing to our mistakes and showing us how we can do better... After this instruction, the worst mistake is to go back to our individual commands and not implement important, necessary changes.

-- Office of the DUSA (BT)